

Georgia's Shrimp Fishery Management for the 21st Century

Background

Harvesting shrimp, whether by trawler plying the shallow ocean waters or with a handmade cast net tossed by a lone fisherman working a tidal creek, is an activity synonymous with life on the Georgia coast. For some it's a livelihood and for others recreation. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR) guides the decisions that balance the health of shrimp populations and their habitats with the needs and desires of Georgia's citizens and visitors. This is a challenging mission given the diverse expectations of those who harvest shrimp, those who enjoy fresh seafood, and those who wish to protect and preserve Georgia's natural resources.

From the post-World War II period through the 1970s, shrimp fishing with large trawls was a profitable endeavor and there was little government regulation. However, beginning in the late 1970s, many significant changes occurred. Estuarine waters traditionally open to trawling were initially closed due to winter freezes, but remained closed as conflicts emerged between recreational anglers, commercial crabbers and trawler operators. By the 1980s, the scientific community, conservation groups, and the general public began to question the impacts of trawling on endangered sea turtles, marine habitats, and sea life caught, but not commercially valuable (generically called bycatch). Last, but not least, the volume of foreign shrimp imported into the United States increased dramatically.

By the 1990s, state and federal mandates for the use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) and Bycatch Reduction Devices (BRDs) forever changed shrimp trawling. The economics of shrimp fishing likewise changed as over 80% of the shrimp consumed by Americans originated from abroad. A ready supply of inexpensive imported shrimp had the devastating effect of driving down the dockside value of wild-harvested domestic shrimp just as operational costs such as diesel fuel, ice, insurance, dockage, and supplies were increasing. To add further complications, coastal development began to displace traditional commercial fishing communities. Nowadays, seafood-packing houses are giving way to condominiums, waterfront homes, and private marinas.

Traditionally, cast netting had been the method used by citizens and visitors to catch small quantities of shrimp for personal consumption and for bait. However, in the early 1980s, a small group of Floridians experimented with commercial cast netting for food shrimp in the waterways of Camden County. Concern about this activity prompted the General Assembly to prohibit shrimp baiting. Participation in this new fishery remained low until the mid-1990s, when a second, and larger, influx of Floridians using cast nets designed to catch shrimp from the deeper areas of tidal rivers and creeks occurred. Immediately conflicts arose among Georgia residents and the Floridians. Conflict also arose between trawler operators who resented the fact that cast netters were allowed to fish in estuarine waters now off-limits to the trawler fleet. A legislative study committee intervened, and in 1998 commercial and recreational food-shrimp cast-net fisheries were regulated by license, gear, and harvest restrictions. The \$2,500 cost of a non-resident commercial cast-net license sent most Floridians back home, and activity in this fishery has remained low. By 2000, commercial cast netters and some recreational cast netters began to advocate for changes in gear and harvest restrictions, most notably the prohibition on the use of modified cast nets. They argue that cast netting is an ecologically sound harvest method and that impediments to efficiency are unreasonable, given the quantity limits currently in place.

By contrast to the food shrimp fishery, the value of bait shrimp has increased as interest in saltwater recreational fishing has steadily grown. Commercial live bait harvesters may use small trawls, but not cast nets, to harvest bait shrimp in designated areas of coastal waters. Recreational bait shrimp harvesters can use cast nets throughout coastal waters, but are restricted to the same areas as commercial

harvesters when using small trawls. As more people come to the Georgia coast and take up residence adjacent to the estuary, conflicts invariably arise between dock owners and bait harvesters. Many do not want the small boats trawling near their docks. Some perceive that this activity will have an adverse affect on their chance to catch shrimp and fish in their local area, some find it aesthetically unpleasing, and some believe that trawling is ecologically unsound.

Need

There are many challenges facing those who participate in Georgia's shrimp fishery. There are conflicts between user groups, between user groups and the regulatory agencies, and between user groups and the general public or conservation groups. It is imperative that GADNR lead the process to resolve present conflicts, prevent future conflicts, and to advance shrimp fishery management.

Approach

There will be two town hall meetings to solicit public input about shrimp fishery management. Then a stakeholder group of representatives from each sector of Georgia's shrimp fishery will be organized to address issues brought forward at these meetings. Technical advice and support will be provided by GADNR, Georgia Southern University, and other appropriate groups. Staff from the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government will facilitate the activities of the stakeholder group from May until August 2005. At the conclusion of this process, action items for law, regulation, and/or policy changes will be developed and disseminated to the Office of the Governor, the DNR Commissioner, the DNR Board, other departmental advisory bodies, and to committees of the Georgia General Assembly.

Goals

The stakeholders' process will advance shrimp fishery management so as to: 1) maximize the opportunity for profit in commercial activities; 2) maximize opportunities for satisfaction in recreational activities; and 3) protect the ecological integrity of Georgia estuaries and nearshore Atlantic Ocean waters.

Schedule of Activities

May 3, 2005 Town hall meeting – 6:30 p.m., Stellar Conference Center, Brunswick, Georgia

May 4, 2005 Town hall meeting – 6:30 p.m., Mighty 8th Air Force Museum, Pooler, Georgia

Stakeholder Group Meetings – 9:00 a.m., Stellar Conference Center, Brunswick

June 9, 2005 – commercial cast net fishery issues

June 30, 2005 – recreational cast net fishery issues

July 13, 2005 – bait shrimp fishery issues

August 9, 2005 – large trawl fishery issues

September (date to be determined) – dissemination of stakeholder group recommendations

For more information on Georgia's shrimp fishery and/or the stakeholder process, contact Spud Woodward, Assistant Director for Marine Fisheries, Coastal Resources Division at (912) 264-7218 or spud_woodward@dnr.state.ga.us